The Tiger Son: A Tale from China

Retold by Sue Cowing
2019

"The Tiger Son" is a popular story in China that the writer Pu Songling (1640–1715) included in his book *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. In this retelling, a widow —a woman whose husband has died — warns her only son to watch out for the tiger in the forest.

As you read, take notes on the widow's feelings about the tiger.

Hundreds of years ago, tigers roamed the forests of China. Almost everyone had seen one sometime in his or her life, and everyone knew someone who knew someone who had come to harm in a tiger's jaws.

In the village of Zhaocheng, a man who was too poor to marry lived with his widowed mother. He took good care of her, making repairs on her house and providing her food. But to hunt for their meat and firewood, he had to go into the forest beyond their village, and in that forest he had often seen a large tiger hunting and swimming in the stream.

The widow warned her son to be careful.

He laughed. "Don't worry, Mother," he said. "Wasn't I born in the Year of the Tiger? I will always return."

But one day as she waited for him, dusk fell around her. Her son did not come home all night.

The next morning, some neighbors came running to tell her the terrible news. The tiger had pounced on her son and eaten him. All that was left of him were his bloody clothes.

The old widow's grief was very great, but so was her anger. She went straight to the local magistrate and beat on the drum at his gate with her cane, demanding that the tiger be arrested and put to death.

"I deeply respect your loss, Old Mother," said the magistrate, "but a tiger cannot be held responsible for what he does by nature. Shall we arrest bees for stinging?"

But the old woman would not leave until something was done. At last the magistrate asked his court, "Who will go and arrest this tiger?"

A deputy named Li Neng, who had had too much wine to drink, said that he would, and the old widow went home.

Of course Li Neng was just saying this to quiet the old lady, and he did nothing about the tiger. But the magistrate scolded him.

“You have given your solemn word. As a matter of honor, you must go get the tiger and bring him here.”

For weeks Li Neng searched for the tiger, but could not find him, much less catch him. The magistrate had the deputy beaten for his failure. Desperate, Li Neng went to the village shrine and threw himself on the ground. What was he to do?

Suddenly a large tiger appeared in the doorway of the shrine. This is surely the end of me, Li Neng said to himself. But I might as well die, since I cannot fulfill my duty.

The tiger did not attack. Instead, he sat quietly, showing neither teeth nor claws.

Li Neng took a deep breath and said, “If... if you are the tiger who killed the widow’s son, you must come with me. You are under arrest.”

To his surprise, the tiger lowered his head so Li Neng could put a loop of rope around his neck.

The people of Zhaocheng were amazed to see the deputy returning to the village with the tiger walking behind him.

The magistrate quickly set up court and said to the tiger, “Did you eat the widow’s son?”

The tiger nodded.

“How did you expect her to live after you killed her only son?”

The tiger closed his eyes.

“If you take a life, your own must be taken. That is the law...”

The tiger nodded again.

To tell the truth, the magistrate was impressed by the animal’s show of remorse.

“...but the law does not say how you must give your life. If you are willing to serve the old woman as her son, I will spare you.”

The tiger nodded once more, solemnly.

So they released him and sent him on his way.

When the old widow learned of this, she was furious. “Now I have no son and no justice either,” she said.

But the next morning she awoke to discover a freshly killed deer at her gate. She kept some of the meat for her supper and traded the hide and the rest of the meat for things she needed.

The next day she found a fresh wild pig in the same place.

Day after day the tiger brought fresh meat to the widow. It was always more than she herself could eat, so she always had some to trade or sell. Before long she was living very comfortably, and she was grateful to the tiger. She began letting him into her garden in the mornings to rest in the shade. Soon no one in the village was afraid of him, in spite of his fierce appearance.

After several years, the old widow died. The tiger came to her graveside and bellowed piteously for days. Then he left and was not seen again in those

parts. The people of the village built a shrine to honor him, “The Shrine of the Ethical Tiger,” because he had been like a son to the old woman.

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Notes

1. **Dusk** *(noun) :* the time of day just before night
2. **Grief** *(noun) :* deep sadness, especially over a loss of a loved one
3. a person who works for the government to make sure that rules are followed, like a judge
4. a person who works as a helper
5. **Solemn** *(adjective) :* serious in appearance, sound, or mood
6. **Desperate** *(adjective) :* having a great need
7. a holy place marked by a building or structure
8. **Impress** *(adjective) :* having a strong, good feeling about someone or something after seeing or meeting them
9. a show of deep sadness after having done something wrong
10. in a heartbreaking way
11. of or related to the ideas of doing right and wrong

The Sun, Moon, and Stars

A traditional Navajo story

retold by Donna Hennes
2007

The Navajos are a Native American people of the Southwestern United States. They refer to themselves as Diné, meaning "the people." In this traditional Navajo (Diné) story, First Woman and First Man bring light to the world. The term "First People" can refer to the earliest people to live in a place, like the Native Americans in the Americas, or one's ancestors.

As you read, take notes on what First Woman does to help fix the First People's problems.

The First People had only four lights to illuminate the world: white light from

the eastern mountains, blue light from the southern mountains, yellow light from the western peaks, and darkness from the north. These lights were very dim and much too far away to bring heat.

The people wanted more daylight. “We barely have enough to see,” they complained.

So First Woman sent Glowworm, Fox Fire, Lightning Beetle, and Firefly to the four corners. They would give more light when it was needed.

But the First People were still not satisfied. “These lights are too small. They flicker on and off and are of little use to us. We do not have eyes like Owl or Bat!”

First Woman kept trying to please her people. She consulted Fire Man on his glowing mountain. He offered to make the land around Fire Mountain bright, but he warned her the light would cover all the lands and there would be smoke.

The people liked the brightness, but they were still not happy. “We do not like the heat and the smoke that comes from Fire Mountain. The heat scorches the earth and we are choked by the smoke,” they grumbled.

Eventually, First Woman had an idea for a different way to send light to Earth. She asked for a large, flat piece of the hardest rock available. After a long search, the people brought her a slab of quartz. It took a lot of hard work and a lot of help for the First Woman to carve the quartz into two wheels.

Once the wheels were ready, First Woman and First Man decorated them as faces with symbols of the powers they each had. They decorated the first wheel with a mask of blue turquoise to give light and heat. They attached red coral to the earlobes and around the rim. On each side was a horn to hold

male lightning and rain. On the rim, they placed bird feathers — cardinal, lark, and eagle — to fly it through the sky and spread the rays of heat and light in the four directions. This was the Sun wheel.

When it was time to decorate the second wheel, First Woman said, “We do not need more heat and light. This one will carry coolness and moisture.” She and First Man used white shell to create a face, with a band of yellow pollen on its chin and a rim of red coral. This wheel had feathers, too: magpie, nighthawk, turkey, and crane feathers to bear its weight. It’s horns held female lightning and soft winds. This was Moon wheel.

“This Sun wheel and Moon wheel cannot stay here,” declared First Woman. “We must place them in the sky!” First Man suggested they carry the disks to the top of the highest mountain and fasten them to the sky with darts of lightning, which the people did.

Now the people had light, heat, coolness, and moisture all coming from the sky. But they still found something to complain about. Because the Sun always stayed in the east and never moved, one side of the land had an unending summer, and the other side had a winter that lasted forever.

“This is not right,” they whined.

First Man agreed. “The Sun must move across the sky, but how can it travel when it is only a stone and has no spirit?” At that moment, two ancient, wise men stepped forward and offered to help. “We will give our spirits to the Sun and the Moon so they will have life and power to move across the sky.” One entered the turquoise disk and he was called Jóhonnaa’ái or Sun Bearer; the other entered the white disk and was called Tl’éhonaa’ái, or Moon Bearer.

Once the Sun and Moon were following their paths through the sky, the people returned to where First Woman had carved the wheels. The blanket

where she had worked was covered with many small stone chips of every shape and size, plus stone dust from the cutting.

“These white stones must not be wasted! We will use them to make more lights in the night sky,” exclaimed First Woman. So again, they worked with their flint knives, chisels, and stone hammers to shape the stars.

To this day, the Sun, the Moon, and the stars created by First Woman, First Man, and all the people remain in the sky where they give light and heat by day and luminous, sparkling patterns at night.

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Notes

1. **Illuminate** *(verb) :* to brighten with light
2. **Scorch** *(verb) :* to burn
3. a hard mineral that looks like glass or crystal
4. **Luminous** *(adjective) :* giving off light; glowing

How the Stories Came to Be

Mabel Powers

1917

Mabel Powers' book *Stories the Iroquois Tell Their Children* retells important stories from the Iroquois, a collection of northeast Native American tribes. Powers preserved these stories by traveling from tribe to tribe to listen and record them. In this story from her book, a narrator describes how stories came to be.

As you read, take notes on the Iroquois' process for storytelling.

Out of the moons of long ago, these stories have come. Then, every tribe of the Iroquois had its storyteller.

When the Old Man of the North came out of his lodge, and the forests and rivers of the Iroquois grew white with his breath, these storytellers wandered from wigwam to wigwam.

Seated on warm skins by the fire, the storyteller would exclaim, “*Hanio*!” This meant, “Come, gather round, and I will tell a story.”

Then all would cry, “*Heh*,” and draw close to the fire. This meant that they were glad to hear the story. And as the flames leaped and chased one another along the fire trail, they would listen to these wonder stories of the Little People, of the trees and flowers, of birds, of animals, and men. When the storyteller had finished, he said, “*Na ho*.” This meant, “It is the end.”

The earth was very young, when the Iroquois first learned how everything came to be, and just why it is that things are as they are. They told these wonderful things to their children, and their children in turn told them to their children; and those children again in turn told them to theirs, that these things might not be forgotten.

Now, but few of the Iroquois know these stories that the grandmothers and old men of the tribe used to tell. The storyteller is no longer seen wandering from wigwam to wigwam.

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Notes

1. a dome-shaped hut or tent

Coyote and Fire

A Folktale from the Pacific Northwest

D.M. Souza
2018

Native Americans were the native, or first, people to live on the land that is now the United States of America. In this Native American story, the people ask Coyote for help.

As you read, take notes on how the people's problem is solved.

Long ago when the world was young, people did not have Fire. They ate their meat and salmon raw. When cold winds blew or snow covered the ground, they could not warm their houses. Only the skookums had Fire. These three evil sisters lived high on a mountain and would not share with anyone.

One icy cold winter, the people met Coyote on the road. "Please, Coyote," they begged, "capture Fire from the skookums or we will freeze."

“I will do what I can,” he said.

That night Coyote climbed the snow-covered mountain where the skookums lived. When he reached the top, he spotted Fire in the distance. Moving close, he saw one of the skookums sitting in front of a house, warming herself by Fire.

For a long time Coyote watched until the skookum went to the door and called, “Sister, sister, get up. It’s your turn to guard Fire.” The second sister appeared and took her place. After a while, she called the third sister. Coyote could hear the sleepy one yawning and groaning loudly inside.

“She is taking so long to come out, maybe I could seize Fire now,” Coyote whispered to himself. “But the skookums are swift. They would surely catch me before I got far. I must think of a good plan.”

Coyote thought and thought, but his mind was foggy. So he asked his sisters, the three huckleberries who lived in his stomach. They were very wise. They would surely know what to do. And, of course, they did.

Carefully, Coyote listened to their plan. Then he went back down the mountain and called together all the animals to tell them what they must do.

The next evening Coyote trudged up the mountainside again. Patiently he watched while the first two skookums took their turns in front of Fire. When the last sister was called, again only yawns and groans drifted outside.

Quick as an arrow, Coyote raced into the open, seized a burning stick, and ran across the snowy field.

“*Aieee*, a thief!” Two skookums began chasing Coyote and throwing ice and snow at him.

Coyote's legs moved faster and faster. His feet barely touched the ground. Still, the skookums came closer. He could feel their fiery breath on his fur. One of the skookums grabbed the tip of his tail. Her hot hand burned it black. (Even today all coyotes have black tips on their tails.)

At last Coyote reached a thicket of shrubs and fell to the ground exhausted. Just at that moment Cougar jumped out, seized the burning stick, and disappeared down the mountainside. For a minute the skookums were confused. But soon they were racing after Cougar.

When Cougar reached a grove of trees, Fox was waiting. She took the burning stick and ran until she came to a tall tree. There Squirrel grabbed the flaming torch, raced up the trunk, and jumped from branch to branch. She leaped along even as the flickering flame burned a black spot on the back of her neck, and her tail curled forward. (Even today squirrels have black spots on their necks and their tails curl forward.)

At the forest's edge, the skookums almost caught up with Squirrel. That's when Antelope took the stick of Fire, sped across a meadow, and handed it to Deer. One animal after another passed Fire on, keeping it just out of reach of the skookums, until it became a tiny hot coal.

Frog swallowed the coal and hopped away, but he wasn't quick enough. A skookum grabbed hold of his tail. So Frog took the biggest leap he had ever taken and left his tail in the skookum's hand. (Even today frogs do not have tails.)

Finally Frog slipped into a river and swam to the other side. By now he was too tired to jump again. He spit out the coal and it landed on Wood. Wood swallowed it.

The skookums looked at one another. Neither one knew how to take Fire from Wood. With a heavy sigh and a shrug of their shoulders, they turned back and returned home to their still sleeping sister.

Meanwhile, Coyote told all the people to stand in a circle around Wood. He gathered branches and leaves and piled them high. Then he began rubbing two pieces of Wood together.

Minutes passed. The people watched. Suddenly sparks flew up. Coyote blew and blew as Fire slipped out of Wood. The flames danced higher and higher, and the people came closer, smiling when they felt Fire's warmth.

Now they could cook their food and warm their homes. (Even today people know how to draw Fire out of Wood.)

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Notes

1. a thick patch of shrubs, bushes, or small trees

The Flying Tortoise

A Nigerian Folk Tale

Retold by Rachel Craft

2020

Nigeria is a country in West Africa. In this Nigerian folktale, retold by Rachel Craft, Tortoise learns an important lesson.

As you read, take notes on Tortoise's actions.

A long time ago, when the animals could still talk, Tortoise was the cleverest of them all. He was also the most handsome. His shell was smooth and shiny as a jewel, and he was very proud of it.

Then one day, a terrible drought came to the savanna where Tortoise lived. The rivers dried up, the trees died, and the grasses disappeared. All the animals on the ground, from the meerkat to the hippopotamus, were hungry. But the birds stayed as plump and happy as ever. Tortoise wondered how this could be.

One night, Tortoise was so hungry he couldn't sleep. While his wife slept in their burrow, he went for a walk outside. He saw all the birds flying up to a wide silver cloud, where the Sky People were having a feast!

Tortoise's eyesight wasn't good enough to see the food, but he could see the birds smacking their beaks. It made his mouth water. He couldn't stand another day of this drought knowing the birds feasted every night. So he used all of his cleverness to come up with a plan.

The next morning, Tortoise went to his friend Parrot.

"We're so hungry down here," he said sadly. "Why don't you and the other birds share your feast with us?"

"We would," Parrot replied, "but the Sky People's food is too heavy for us to carry. And if we dropped it from the clouds, it would smash into many pieces."

"I am much bigger and stronger than you birds," Tortoise said. "Perhaps I could join you at the feast and carry some food down with me."

Parrot laughed. "Ca-ca-caw! A fine plan, my friend, except you cannot fly."

"Then why don't you lend me your feathers?" Tortoise asked. "If each bird gives me one, I might be able to fly."

Parrot thought this plan could work, so she gathered all the birds. They each plucked a feather from their wing and gave it to Tortoise. From these he crafted a pair of bright, rainbow-colored wings. He took a running start and — *flap, flap, flap* — lifted off the ground. Soon he reached the cloud where the Sky People were cooking their feast.

"We've never seen a bird like you before," they said to Tortoise. "What is your name?"

“All-of-You,” said Tortoise, in his most cunning voice.

Parrot frowned. “Really? I thought your name was Tortoise.”

“That is my surname,” Tortoise lied. “My first name is All-of-You.”

Tortoise sat down at the birds’ table. When the Sky People came with their trays and platters, Tortoise made sure to ask, “Who is this food for?”

“Why, it’s for all of you,” the Sky People said as they went off to fill the other tables.

Tortoise pretended to be surprised. “This is all for me? Don’t worry, birds.” He smiled his most cunning smile. “I’m sure they’ll bring your plates soon. But I’m starved, so I hope you don’t mind if I start eating.” Which he did, with gusto.

Of course, the Sky People did not bring any more food. But by the time the birds realized this, Tortoise had eaten every crumb! The birds were so angry, they flocked around him and took back all the feathers he had borrowed.

Now Tortoise had a problem. With no wings, he had no way to get back to the ground. So he thought of another plan. He would send a message to his wife. He would tell her to move all the soft things, like blankets and pillows, out from their burrow. Then he could leap from the clouds and have a safe place to land. Tortoise begged the birds to fly down and deliver this message, but they were too angry.

Parrot, who was even angrier than the other birds, came up with a plan of her own. She said to Tortoise, in her most cunning voice, “Friend, I will take your message. Wait here until your wife has finished moving the soft things. Then jump down.”

Tortoise sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

Parrot flew down to the burrow. “Your husband has terrible news,” she told Tortoise’s wife. “His worst enemy is planning to attack you from the sky. You must bring all the hard things from your burrow and place them out here. That way, his enemy will have no safe place to land.”

Of course, this news alarmed Tortoise’s wife. She followed Parrot’s instructions. From high above, Tortoise saw her moving things out of the burrow. But with his poor eyesight, he couldn’t see she was moving hard objects like metal pots and wooden tables. Then he leaped from the clouds.

When Tortoise landed in the pile of hard things, his shell broke into many pieces. Now he was naked, his skin wrinkled as a prune. He dashed into his burrow. “I can’t go outside!” he wailed. “I can’t be seen like this!” You see, a tortoise without his shell is like a lion without his mane, or a peacock without his tail feathers.

While Tortoise told his wife what had happened, she went outside to collect the pieces of shell and used tree sap to stick them back together.

“It serves you right.” She handed Tortoise his new shell, now cracked and misshapen. “Let this be a reminder to not be so selfish.”

That is why Tortoise’s children and grandchildren, and their grandchildren after them, have had lumpy, bumpy shells ever since.

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Notes

1. **Drought** *(noun) :* a long period of time with very little or no rain
2. a large flat area of land with grass and very few trees, especially in Africa and South America
3. **Plump** *(adjective) :* full or fat
4. **Pluck** *(verb) :* to grab and remove quickly
5. with great enjoyment or energy

The Princess and the Pea

Hans Christian Andersen

1835

Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) was a Danish writer, best remembered for his popular fairy tales. This fairy tale deals with the tradition of European royalty only letting their children marry people of similar high social class.

As you read, note what the prince and his family think makes a good bride.

Once upon a time there was a prince who wanted to marry a princess; but she would have to be a real princess. He travelled all over the world to find one, but nowhere could he get what he wanted. There were princesses enough, but it was difficult to find out whether they were real ones. There was always something about them that was not as it should be. So he came home again and was sad, for he would have liked very much to have a real princess.

One evening a terrible storm came on; there was thunder and lightning, and the rain poured down in torrents. Suddenly a knocking was heard at the city gate, and the old king went to open it.

It was a princess standing out there in front of the gate. But, good gracious! what a sight the rain and the wind had made her look. The water ran down from her hair and clothes; it ran down into the toes of her shoes and out again at the heels. And yet she said that she was a real princess.

“Well, we’ll soon find that out,” thought the old queen. But she said nothing, went into the bed-room, took all the bedding off the bedstead, and laid a pea on the bottom; then she took twenty mattresses and laid them on the pea, and then twenty eider-down beds on top of the mattresses.

On this the princess had to lie all night. In the morning she was asked how she had slept.

“Oh, very badly!” said she. “I have scarcely closed my eyes all night. Heaven only knows what was in the bed, but I was lying on something hard, so that I am black and blue all over my body. It’s horrible!”

Now they knew that she was a real princess because she had felt the pea right through the twenty mattresses and the twenty eider-down beds.

Nobody but a real princess could be as sensitive as that.

So the prince took her for his wife, for now he knew that he had a real princess; and the pea was put in the museum, where it may still be seen, if no one has stolen it.

There, that is a true story.

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Notes

1. **Torrent** *(noun) :* a strong, fast-moving stream of water
2. an expression of surprise
3. the frame of a bed upon which the mattress is placed
4. small, soft feathers from the breast of the female eider duck
5. **Scarcely** *(adverb) :* barely, hardly

The Lion and the Mouse

Aesop
620-560 BCE

Aesop was a storyteller who lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 560 BCE. This story is part of his collection of tales known as "Aesop's Fables," which did not survive in writing but were passed down by people retelling them. They have deeply influenced children's literature and modern storytelling culture.

As you read, take notes on the relationship between the two characters and the theme.

A Lion lay asleep in the forest, his great head resting on his paws. A timid little Mouse came upon him unexpectedly, and in her fright and haste to get away, ran across the Lion’s nose. Roused from his nap, the Lion laid his huge paw angrily on the tiny creature to kill her.

“Spare me!” begged the poor Mouse. “Please let me go and some day I will surely repay you.”

The Lion was much amused to think that a Mouse could ever help him. But he was generous and finally let the Mouse go.

Some days later, while stalking his prey in the forest, the Lion was caught in the toils of a hunter’s net. Unable to free himself, he filled the forest with his angry roaring.

The Mouse knew the voice and quickly found the Lion struggling in the net. Running to one of the great ropes that bound him, she gnawed it until it parted, and soon the Lion was free.

“You laughed when I said I would repay you,” said the Mouse. “Now you see that even a Mouse can help a Lion.”

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